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Cancer fear may sweeten Peripheral Canal appeal

- The controversial project would help urban water agencies avoid carcinogens that form when purification chemicals combine with salt

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Health concerns over a cancer-causing contaminant easily formed in the Delta water 22 million Californians drink is stoking interest in reviving the controversial Peripheral Canal.

Many thought the proposed 43-mile ditch between Sacramento and Tracy was dead forever when voters rejected it in 1982. Northern Californians condemned the project as a Southern California water grab that would devastate Delta fish and wildlife.

But now it's back in a smaller form with a new mission.

Urban water suppliers, including Bay Area ones, see health concerns as fresh ammunition to consider a smaller, more fish-friendly canal to improve water safety.

The canal vaults back into the limelight today with release of the state and federal governments' environmental report on the canal or wider Delta channels as alternatives to fix water and fishery problems.

The newest water health worry is bromate, a carcinogen formed when purification chemicals bond with the salt naturally found in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, a seawater and freshwater mixing zone.

"We're saying we don't want to compromise public health. The canal shows the most promise for dealing with bromate," said Byron Buck, executive director of the California Urban Water Agencies. "It would be nice not to have to deal with a canal because of the past politics, but we have a responsibility to look at what's best for our customers' interests."

The canal would avoid bromates by sending salt-free Sacramento River water around the Delta to state and federal pumps that push supplies to Livermore, San Jose, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles and other cities.

The Contra Costa Water District could be offered the opportunity to tap into canal water, say planners with CALFED, a consortium of state and federal agencies.

Without relief from salt, Delta water users could have extreme trouble meeting bromate health standards the federal government is expected to set over the next five years, say experts hired by the urban water group.

If the Environmental Protection Agency sets the standard low enough, Delta water drinkers could face a doubling or tripling of water rates to pay for expensive reverse osmosis filters, according to the report for the urban water leaders.

"When you look at bromates, California ranks at the bottom with poor water quality because of where we get our water," said Steve Arakawa, associate chief of the planning division of the Metropolitan Water District in Los Angeles and four neighboring counties. "We are looking for a better source."

Ironically, new treatment technology that reduces many water impurities leads to the bromates.

Many Delta water users are switching to ozone as a disinfectant because it effectively destroys bacteria and parasites without causing the harmful byproducts that chlorine generates. Ozone's weak point: It combines with salt to form bromates.

Environmentalists are not happy with the canal idea's resurgence. It could foster more Delta water exports, more declines in fish populations and more seawater intrusion, they say.

They suggest there may be other economical ways to treat water to control bromates.

"We don't think Californians have to choose between having safe water and healthy fisheries," said Cynthia Koehler, attorney for the San Francisco Bay Association. "If this canal is the same as or similar to the old Peripheral Canal, I think it's dead in the water."

CALFED planners and California water suppliers say the new canal plan is vastly different from and more environmentally sound than the 1982 plan. The public may not easily accept that, the planners admit.

"The (canal) may not be possible due to the political stigma resulting from the Peripheral Canal debate in the early 1980s," CALFED planners wrote last month in listing the weaknesses of the canal alternative.

CALFED administrators won't recommend a plan until summer. In a series of reports, however, the consortium's planners rank the canal as the best option for protecting fish from pumps, improving tap-water safety, capturing winter runoff for reservoirs and ensuring reliable supplies for much of California.

"It's not the same project as before. We learned the last time around you have to have policy before plumbing. We have that policy now," said Steve Hall, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies. "This is clearly not about water supply, but about improving drinking water and protecting fish."

Water suppliers would get some benefits, such as a more predictable supply, he said.

The Legislature designed its 1982 canal plan to get more water without environmental protections that have arisen since then.

The state and federal governments have approved Delta water quality standards requiring more freshwater through the Delta.

- Congress in 1992 approved the Miller-Bradley law reallocating 800,000 acre-feet of federal water annually from cities to rivers and the Delta.
- Several Delta fish have endangered or threatened species protection.
- CALFED is committed to spending \$1 billion to create and improve 138,000 to 191,000

...towards and spawning habitat, and install screens over pumps to stop fish deaths. Bishop, Contra Costa Water District general manager, said California ought to fix the Delta first with wide channels to rear fish, and provide more river flows to sweeten drinking water.

If those measures fail to bring Delta water within new bromate health limits, then it might be time for a pipeline or small canal around the region to meet urban water quality needs, Bishop suggested.

"This is not a Peripheral Canal. The canal was about abandoning the Delta. This is about fixing the Delta," said Bishop, who is active in negotiations over the Delta options. "This is about protecting people from cancer."

Some people fear any kind of canal around the Delta weakens political support to ensure adequate freshwater flows to the region.

"They are going to abandon the Delta," said Pete Margiotta of Walnut Creek, a fish advocate worried about the canal.

Politicians out to get water for Southern California can renege on any environmental safeguards or promises, he said. It is a common refrain among canal opponents: You can't trust the assurances.

Water suppliers reply that they can't afford to lose interest in the Delta because they will take water from it sometimes, even if a canal is built.

In CALFED's canal alternative, state and federal water operators would seasonally shut down the canal to allow migrating fish to pass by. Then, they would pump water directly from the Delta, as is done now year-round.

Hall, the head of the Association of California Water Agencies, said contracts and habitat protection plans can be written to assure the Delta of protections and water agencies of predictable supplies.

"The water war is over in California. We will have a system that protects everyone's interests," Hall said.

CALFED has estimated it will cost \$4 billion to \$8 billion over 25 to 30 years to carry out the big Delta fix. Reservoirs to capture winter runoff will be in the plan, but CALFED hasn't picked the sites or size yet.

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